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High Bandwidth, Affordable Access

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Statewide High Speed Network

- *Ensure that every library has easy and affordable access to a high quality, high bandwidth telecommunications network.*

Public libraries, the target of the *Vision 2010* challenge to realize universal high speed Internet access, have experienced dramatic improvement in affordable and reliable connectivity since the publication of the *Vision 2010* issue of *OLA Quarterly* (Fall 2001). At that time around 28 percent of all Oregon public library buildings offered 56K dial-up connections to their communities, and even libraries that had dedicated access often offered less than speedy connections. As of January 2004, only 15 of 210 public library buildings offered less than 256K, and only 12 of these still had dial-up.

The changes have come quickly and have been continuous. What has contributed to this relatively rapid evolution, the first step in enabling libraries to provide 24/7/365 services to its citizens?

E-rate discount program.

Although fewer than half of Oregon public libraries take advantage of the federal E-rate program, the cost savings are very important for libraries that choose to apply and participate. E-rate discounts have significantly reduced the cost of telecommunications and internet access for these libraries, with a little time and effort from library staff. Based on federal poverty measures (local participation in the National School Lunch Program), discounts can be substantial: if the student participation is 1 percent, urban libraries are eligible for a 20 percent discount, and rural libraries, 25 percent; at the high end, with 75 to 100 percent school

lunch participation, both rural and urban libraries are eligible for 90 percent discounts on services for which they apply. (For the complete program discount matrix, see the Schools and Library Division (SLD) site at <http://www.sl.universalservice.org/reference/dmatrix.asp>.)

State of Oregon Enterprise Network (SOEN).

State networking, now called Enterprise Network Services, has contributed to network affordability for some larger library systems and consortia, allowing them to subscribe to more comprehensive services with greater bandwidth and speed at a reasonable cost. In addition, under the auspices of the State of Oregon, its Department of Administrative Services (DAS) applies annually for E-rate discounts for telecommunications services on behalf of these library systems, further reducing costs.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Gates Foundation's farsighted and generous assistance in upgrading Internet connections for qualified public libraries as part of its State Partnership Program has provided improvement in connections for many of Oregon's smaller libraries. Most upgrades to more reliable, higher bandwidth took place during 2002, the year that the Gates Foundation brought its program to Oregon. The upgrades and the generous grants of high-end public access computers contributed to higher community expectations and have motivated libraries to assure dependable broadband connections, significantly benefiting users.


Local efforts by librarians, community organizations, and governments.

Beyond formal government and private programs, improved connectivity in small



libraries has been brought by another powerful force—the persistence and creativity of local librarians and generous community stalwarts, including Boards of Trustees, Friends of the Library groups, and community-minded telecommunications and ISP companies. These bootstrap groups have worked to ensure that their communities have fast, reliable connections at an affordable cost through community and other partnerships. A good example is Oregon Trail Internet, a Pendleton based service provider that was named OLA's Library Supporter of the Year in 2002 for its work with and support of public libraries throughout Eastern Oregon.

Oregon's High Speed Network.

Is there a statewide high speed network for libraries in Oregon? No. Yet 93 percent of library buildings offer broadband access to the Internet for their communities, using all manner of connections—e.g., DSL, frame relay, wireless, T-1, cable, satellite, T-3, and fiber optic. By providing this infrastructure, libraries make possible many 24/7 services for their users, including online catalogs, full text databases, online reference services, programming information for adults and children, and e-government resources. 

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